

**Protecting Posterity: The Effect of Disability and Poverty on Children**

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## POVERTY AND DISABILITY IN CHILDREN

### **Abstract**

This paper exposes the adverse effects that poverty and disability have on children in the many aspects of their lives. Among these aspects are home life, education, future prospects, and social life. In researching studies, reviewing articles, and conducting interviews with people in the field, I have found that the intersectionality between disability and poverty can produce much hardship in children's lives. The effects of poverty and disability are intertwined and often the presence of one can bring the onset of the other. Having both of these hardships in ones' life can lead to lack of education, social exclusion, difficult home life, poor health, and limited future prospects. This problem is one of great importance to disciplines that interact with children or deal with poverty and disability. Some ways to begin to diminish this problem are to change the way in which society views these problems. In changing the attitude of society toward these children, we allow them to have opportunities which they did not before. We can also do more research to figure out the relationship between disability and poverty and how it affects children. Additionally, the expansion of helpful programs would allow for more children to be reached and assisted. These interventions can aid in improving the lives of children.

*Keywords:* Disability, Poverty, Accessibility, Quality of Life

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She came into the classroom with a thin jacket and shorts on in 40-degree weather. Her hair was unbrushed. She hurriedly ate her breakfast, then ate what food her classmates had left over. He arrived late to school most days. He threw tantrums over several little things throughout the day. He wanted attention from the teachers constantly. At the end of the day he went home to a foster family with many other kids. She had a hard time following the directions. It took many repetitions for her to obey them. She often acted out and sometimes hit other kids. When she talked, none of her words were understandable. She was pulled out of the classroom almost every day for speech therapy. Not a day went by when one or more of the students in this class were not out sick. This is the reality of what you would see if you walked into the Head Start classroom at Central Elementary School in Carter County Tennessee. Less than ten minutes away from Milligan, children are struggling with the harsh realities of poverty and disability. These problems plague children all over the country and the world, but the needs start here: right in our own backyard.

Both disability and poverty have an adverse effect on one's life, but when put together the hardships increase dramatically. Poverty and disability are extreme barriers in the life of a child. They limit the child's access to the world in many different ways. They often contribute to the lack of access to resources, and can limit a child's abilities. Children impacted by both poverty and disability have a more difficult home life, less success in school, lack of needed assistance, and limited opportunities for the future, among other problems. Importantly, "the association between poverty and child disability is of particular concern as it indicates that children with disability are significantly more likely to live under conditions that have been shown to impede development, educational attainment and adjustment, and increase the risk of

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poor health, additional impairment, and social exclusion” (Emerson et al., 2010, p. 224). As a society, we have a responsibility to look out for those more vulnerable members that need assistance. We need to be aware of how these problems affect children and work to improve their situation. We can help put systems into place that will help these kids get the assistance they need to succeed in life. Poverty and disability are issues that affect a child’s home life, health, education, social involvement, and future prospects. These are problems that require attention and problems that could be lessened by changing societal attitudes, researching more, expanding programs, and implementing aids in the lives of these children.

Poverty is commonly known as the “inability to participate fully in the life of one’s society due to a lack of resources” (Nolan, 2016, p.14). Poverty has a significant effect on many children around the globe. Another issue that affects children is disability. Disability has two common definitions. The medical model of disability is patient centered and draws attention to disease or lack of function. The social model of disability focuses on how the environment limits and excludes a person, not on the person themselves (Halfon et al., 2012). It is no question that disability and poverty are limiting factors in a child’s life. In addition to this, they are interrelated and have compounding effects. Being disabled makes one more likely to be or to become poor. Likewise, being of low socio-economic status makes one more likely to have or acquire a disability or chronic illness. This results in a doubly limited life for those who are affected by both poverty and disability.

### **Home Life**

One of the areas of a child’s life that poverty and disability affect negatively is the home life. Children often lack the support from parents that they so desperately need. Because of poverty, a child’s guardians are often forced to work multiple jobs with long hours just to

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provide for their family's most basic needs. This does not allow them time to assist with things like homework, play, and activities that the child might be involved in. Given that this lack of support can have harmful outcomes for a normal child, one shudders to imagine the implications for a disabled child. Another factor that causes these children to be ill-supported is lack of knowledge. Many parents do not know how to care for a child with disabilities, much less have to skills to do so. Having a guardian who is unequipped to care for a disabled child can lead to a multitude of problems down the road. This is problematic considering that children with disabilities have much different needs than the average kid, and therefore need more support from a knowledgeable adult.

Lack of support in the home life extends far beyond parental capabilities and into the community. One major system of support that can be helpful to children is community programs. However, lower income children with disabilities often struggle to access these additional supports. Programs intended to assist impoverished children often do not provide accommodations for those with disabilities. This prevents them from being able to participate. Similarly, programs specifically intended for disabled children are not often found in areas of low socio-economic status, making it almost impossible to access. According to experts, many programs do not have adequate funding to provide assistance to all eligible children (Peterson et al., 2011). This creates a circular issue where children lack access to helpful programs and helpful programs lack the resources to reach needy children.

The fact that poverty and disability are so interrelated does nothing to help the situation of these children. Impoverished children with disabilities live with three compounding factors that worsen their circumstances. The first, often overlooked, factor is the fact that they are children. This makes it impossible to advocate or provide for themselves the things that they

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need because of their poverty and disability. This also makes it harder for them to communicate their needs to those who could help them. Children's complete reliance on others to provide for their needs puts them in a very vulnerable situation in society. The second and third factors are poverty and disability respectively. Both of these issues contribute to the presence of the other and exacerbate their effects on one's life. As pointed out by Eide and Ingstad, "disability and poverty are linked together in a 'vicious circle,'" with each one contributing to the prevalence and severity of the other to the detriment of those impacted (2011, p. 138).

### **Health**

A significant problem that children with disabilities in poverty have to deal with on a daily basis is health issues. Not only do they have to deal with whatever health issues may come with their particular disability, but they are also more prone to getting sick because of their situation in poverty. Too, people who are impoverished are at a higher likelihood to become disabled. Nora Groce et al. explain this relation in depth:

"Chronically poor people are often at risk of ill health and injuries which may lead to disability through a number of routes. They often live in unsanitary and substandard housing conditions, are unable to afford nutritious foods, lack the ability to access clean water and basic sanitation, are more likely to have unsafe or dangerous jobs, and live in areas where there is a higher probability that they will be victims of violence. And should they become ill or injured, these already poor people are also less likely to be able to afford the medical care that would keep an illness or injury from becoming a permanent" (2011, p.1498).

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Poor health is a persistent issue among the poor and disabled. This situation can cause countless problems down the road and reduce quality of life for these children.

Lack of quality health care is another factor in the grim health outcomes of the poor and disabled. Due to poverty, many families cannot afford good health care or even health care at all. Children suffer from this circumstance doubly because they are dependent on an adult caretaker to provide for their health-related needs. Some children do have access to healthcare, but at a steep cost. Since “their families devote considerable time and effort to providing health-related care,” they “often experience financial burden, work loss, poor mental and physical health, and negative social consequences” (Halfon et al., 2012, p. 14). This means that even if the families are able to provide healthcare for their disabled child, they are often digging themselves further into poverty and amassing other problems in the process. Lack of easily accessible quality healthcare and poor health in general are severe disadvantages for disabled children in poverty.

### **Education**

The problems that children face in their home life as a result of poverty and disability can bleed over into their schooling. If children are having problems at home and lack basic needs, they will not be able to focus in school and will struggle to learn anything. This is a commonly known fact in the education field based on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (see figure 1). Maslow’s Hierarchy explains that the basic needs of a child must be met before they are able to do other things. For example, a child who is hungry cannot pay attention in class or work on a project because they can only think about the fact that they are hungry. The same thing will happen to children who are affected by poverty and disability. Notably, “it is hard to break the cycle [of poverty] if school is not a priority” (Bowers, 2020). If these children are lacking some

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basic need because of their situation, they will not be able to move up the hierarchy to more complicated tasks like learning.

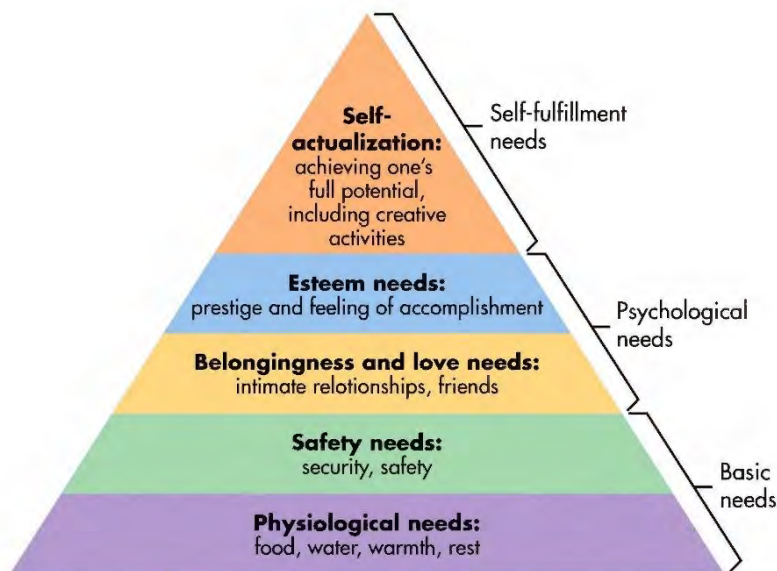


Figure 1 (Mcleod, 2020)

Another barrier to the education of poor disabled children is the lack of trained special education teachers and support staff. A common shortcoming in schools located in areas of low SES is that there is often a lack of high-quality educators. This trickles down to the special education teachers as well. However, students under a special education teacher have a greater need for their teacher to be well-trained and equipped to handle their needs than do general education students. Too, special education programs are sometimes viewed as extraneous programs and thus are among the first to be cut when schools face financial issues. This means that in low-funded schools, children with disabilities will suffer the most.

Not only do schools have a scarcity of well-trained teachers, they also do not have enough resources or funding to be able to help these kids. Schools in lower income areas often lack programs and funding that would give these students opportunities to learn and succeed.



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They also do not have reliable access to materials and resources that could enhance the learning experience for these kids. In fact, “living in a high-poverty neighborhood practically ensures that a student will attend an underresourced, underfunded, underperforming school with poor postschool outcomes” (Madaus et al., 2014, p. 52). When asked about how poverty and disability affect access to quality education, Dr. Tara Cosco related her experience: “I see some schools have access to computers and laptops and other schools don't have these supplies. I see schools with textbooks and materials that help students grasp the concepts needed to progress and others lack those resources. It is sad and something needs to change. Some children can attend schools designed specifically for their needs if their parents can afford it” (2020). Unfortunately, most poor children cannot afford to go to specialized schools built specifically for them. This drives the wedge further between disabled children who are well off and those that live in poverty.

Due to a lack of good teachers and school funding, children affected by poverty and disability will often have poor academic achievement. Factors including distraction from school due to basic needs left unfulfilled, poorly trained teachers, and ill-equipped schools all contribute to poor academic outcome. Another systematic failure that effects the education of these children is the special education qualification system. Access to special education requires a child to be eligible. However, due to the complicated nature of eligibility requirements, some children who could benefit from special education are deemed ineligible. Eligibility requirements are based off factors like low SES, developmental risks, biological risks, minority status, and others (Peterson et al., 2011). Therefore, children are missing out on a helpful program due to flaws and holes in the system of identification (Halfon et al., 2012). These

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compounding factors contribute to poor educational outcome for students affected by poverty and disability.

### **Social Involvement**

Children affected by disability and poverty also face barriers to full social participation. A huge part of this is due to “stigmatisation and discrimination of people with disabilities” which “creates barriers to equal access...for children and young people with disabilities” (Eide & Ingstad, 2011, p. 87). Negative views of people with disabilities and impoverished people are rife in society. Due to these discriminatory viewpoints, children affected by these issues are often barred from full participation in social aspects of their life. This can look like adults talking down to these children because they underestimate their mental capacity, peers making fun of the child’s disability due to lack of understanding, or even trouble performing in society due to systematic discrimination.

Poverty and disability also generate physical barriers to social participation. If a child has a physical disability, it can be hard for them to participate in social activities with peers due to their limitations. If a child has an intellectual disability, though they may have the capacity to keep up with their peers physically, they may have trouble understanding rules or relating emotionally to their friends. Mental and emotional barriers are often invisible to onlookers, but can affect the child greatly. Poverty can also create physical barriers to social participation. many families in poverty cannot afford having their children participate in camps, sports, or afterschool clubs. Too, the parents often do not have the time available to take their children to these various activities. This results in a severe lack of opportunities for participation in social activities for these children.

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Another concerning complication that arises from social exclusion and discrimination is isolation. People who are frequently marginalized and excluded are more prone to social isolation. This is not only saddening, but troubling. Children need social interaction with others in order to maintain normal development. When a child with special needs is isolated from others, they miss the opportunity for social interaction. This can result in them falling even further behind their peers developmentally. Social isolation is the concerning result of other social factors and can have grievous effects on the mental well-being and development of children.

In addition to discrimination, social exclusion, and isolation, another crippling issue faced in the social lives of children is the low bar of expectations society has set for them. One of the most appalling issues that disabled children in poverty face is the attitudes of society. Many people look down on disabled children as inferior, because of their differences. Even these children's parents often underestimate their abilities and mental capacity. Their teachers have low expectations for their success in the classroom. Society is in disbelief that these children will ever amount to anything. "Disabled people continue to face particular social disadvantages which have pernicious consequences for their ability to live as equal citizens in today's society" (Walker & Thomas, 2011, p. 237).

### **Future Prospects**

Children impacted by poverty and disability suffer poor postsecondary options. One of the main contributing factors to this is that they do not receive as much information about their options as most well off, non-disabled students do. These students are far "less likely to receive information about colleges in traditional ways" (Madaus et al., 2014, p. 53). Their teachers do not inform them about options for further education after high school such as college or

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vocational school. Much of this is due to opinion that these students are “not college material” (Bowers, 2020). The fact that these students are poorly informed contributes greatly to their low college attendance rates and poor post school outcomes.

If students do end up hearing about post high school opportunities, they are still less likely to attend college in the first place and to complete it if they do attend (Madaus et al., 2014). A considerable reason that many of these children do not go to college is the steep prices of tuition. Impoverished children can scarcely afford to pay for college. If they do attend college, they are less likely than the average student to complete it. This is largely due to lack of support in higher education for people with disabilities. The low rates of college attendance and completion for students affected by disability and poverty are concerning.

In addition to low college attendance, people affected by poverty and disability have low employment rates. “Although people with disabilities have lower overall employment rates than people without disabilities, rates of employment increase with levels of education, even for those with more significant disabilities” (Madaus et al., 2014, p. 50). This fact does not provide much comfort, given that many children with disabilities do not even make it to college or any form of higher education. This will negatively affect their likelihood of employment. Furthermore, many employers refuse to hire people with disabilities due to the false stereotype that they cannot perform in the work place on the same level as other employees. By this calculation, the future of impoverished children with disabilities is bleak.

### **Solutions**

Poverty and disability have a pronounced effect on a child’s life. From negative consequences in their home life, health, and education, to socialization problems and poor future

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prospects, it might look like there is little hope for these children. In fact, finding solutions to these universal problems seems an insurmountable task. Fortunately, there are steps we can take to help these children without reconstructing the fabric of our society entirely.

A huge part of the problem faced by these children is the attitudes of society towards poverty and disability. If these children are told by society over and over that they will never perform well in school, go to college, get a job, maintain a good social life, or succeed in their goals, then they are almost certainly going to believe this. These attitudes and expectations are detrimental to the outcomes of these children. The first step we can take to help children with disabilities in poverty is to change our attitudes toward them. We have to stop expecting them to fail before we even give them a chance to succeed. If we set limits on what they can do, we will never know how much they are truly capable of. Instead of telling these kids what they cannot do, we need to start helping them achieve greater things.

In order for children to achieve greater things, we need to know how we can help them do so. This requires research. A major barrier in poverty and disability aid is the lack of knowledge about the topic and its effects on people. Unless there is specific research that investigates the complex link of poverty and disability in specific situations, there will be no way to determine what aids are needed for those situations. In essence, “the more we know about the links between disability and poverty, the more effectively we can intervene to make a difference in the lives of persons with disabilities who today continue to struggle with poverty” (Groce et al., 2011, p. 1510). More extensive research into this relationship and its effects on children will promote understanding of what these children are going through. Only through further research can we have enough information to begin solving these complicated problems in the specific ways that they are manifested in a child’s life.

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Although altering attitudes and increasing research are important tools in the fight to minimize the consequences of child poverty and disability, there is a more tangible solution available. Expanding the programs that are already working to abate these issues is an attainable solution that could assist many children. There is a myriad of programs that are already alleviating the burden of poverty and disability on children. Some of these policies and programs include IDEA, Head Start, and state Early Intervention programs. IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act) “mandates that education agencies make concerted efforts to identify and serve children in need of special education services” (Peterson et al., 2011, p.37). This policy ensures that every child who needs specialized education gets it. Head Start is an “effort to enhance the development of young children living in poverty” with “a two-generation approach to serving young children and their families and the inclusion of children with disabilities” (Peterson et al., 2011, p. 29). Andrea Bowers, who has been teaching Head Start for 28 years, details this two-generation approach: “We work with parents to help them make a better life for their kids, we push the parents to finish high school and get their GED, we teach them the importance of education and well-being and the impact these have on their children’s futures” (2020). Head Start gives young children from low income families a “head start” in school so that they can make up for some of the delays caused by poverty and disability. State Early Intervention Programs also work to get young children the developmental help they need. For example, Tennessee Early Intervention System or “TEIS serves children birth until age 3 with developmental delays, medical disabilities etc. [They] are a voluntary program that provides services such as Occupational, Physical, Speech Therapy along with Developmental Therapy provided by an Early Interventionist...[they] provide an objective approach to helping families meet the needs and services for their child” (Manship, 2020).

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Programs like these and others help children immensely, but there is a problem. They are often underfunded and underequipped to meet the needs of the children they serve. They also typically serve far less children than are eligible due to restraints. If we can expand the reach of these programs in order to render them available and accessible to the poor, disabled children, then we can start to lessen the effects of these problems and give kids more opportunities in life.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly, poverty and disability create many problems and barriers in the life of a child. However, if our culture can change its attitudes towards these problems, increase our understanding of how these problems affect children through extensive research, and expand the already beneficial programs, then we have a chance to help these children. Disabled and poor children “should have the same opportunities and choices... to improve their quality of life and be respected and included” as any other human being would (Walker & Thomas, 2011, p. 231). We as a society have the responsibility to help these children gain equal access to these opportunities in their lifetimes.

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